

As One Loses, Another Gains

Harford strategy focuses on APG

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For Harford County Executive James M. Harkins, the Pentagon's plans to increase civilian and military employment at Aberdeen Proving Ground come as a relief, but no great surprise.

Since taking office in 1998, he says he has been striving to hitch the county's economy to the high-tech research conducted at the installation, even though its long-term future depends on the vagaries of Pentagon funding and policies set in Washington.

"When I came in seven years ago as county executive," he said, "one of the pillars of my administration was that we were going to broker the technology of Aberdeen Proving Ground behind the fence to in front of the fence."

That strategy apparently paid off two weeks ago when the Defense Department announced that more than 5,300 civilian employees would be reassigned to Aberdeen under the latest plan to close some military bases and realign others.

Harkins and other Maryland leaders say that these new workers, who, for instance, design radar for unmanned spy planes, wouldn't so much remake Harford County as reaffirm a decade of public investment in luring the high-tech industry to this conveniently located bedroom community.

"We have planned for this for a long time," he said. "This is not a spur of the moment, spontaneous thing."

But the county still faces challenges, officials say, if it is to house, transport and educate the families associated with this ratcheting up of the county's rapid job growth.

Though about 1,500 homes are built annually in Harford, housing prices have soared 80 percent in the past five years, said Timothy Hopkins, president of the county Association of Realtors. "We have a tight supply of housing in all price ranges," he said. "We just don't have the supply at this point in time to support a large increase like that."

Development is at least temporarily constrained, as crowding in most of the schools has triggered housing moratoriums under Harford's adequate public facilities law. The new Aberdeen High School that opened last year, replacing an old building, has more students than it was designed to hold.

"When those military jobs come through or those private jobs, we should expect more students in that school," said Harford Councilman Richard C. Slutzky, a former teacher there.

With state funding for school construction inadequate, county officials have decided to increase local funding. The state also has targeted for upgrades the roads serving APG and the commuter-rail stations at Edgewood and Aberdeen.

"We know what we need, and we're getting them done now and quickly," said Harkins, who announced he is leaving office to take a position in the Ehrlich administration. "Our technology hub was quietly, silently curtained for years. Now the curtain has been pulled back."

Harford strategy focuses on APG *(continued)*

Aberdeen is slated to lose 3,400 military personnel, the bulk of them with the relocation of the Ordnance Center and School. But with the influx of high-tech workers from Fort Monmouth, N.J., and elsewhere, the installation stands to increase its permanent work force by a net of nearly 2,200.

"The jobs that are being moved are very industrial - storage, warehousing and maintenance jobs," said Wyatt Colclasure, president of the Army Alliance, a coalition of area business interests, and a consultant for Booz Allen Hamilton. "They're important, but they aren't high-technology research and development work. These gains just reinforce the proving ground as a high-tech center, and really the economic climate in Maryland as a whole."

The alliance has been one of the linchpins of the community's effort to support the post and advocate for Pentagon funding of research done at Aberdeen.

To get those high-powered and high-paying technology jobs, county officials aimed to play up Aberdeen's state-of-the-art facilities and its brainpower.

"We have what no one else has," the county executive said, noting that Aberdeen got one of the Pentagon's four supercomputers last year. With laboratories researching chemical and biological defense, the post also represents "the largest concentration of chemical engineers anyplace," he added.

The bid to use Aberdeen as a magnet for high-tech business outside the post also has paid off. Battelle Memorial Institute opened a 78,000-square foot research center in Aberdeen in 2002. The Ohio-based firm, which develops commercial and military technology, recently announced plans to double its Aberdeen operations, eventually employing more than 1,000.

To help prepare Harford residents for the new high-paying jobs, the county has created a math-and-science magnet program at Aberdeen High School, and it has established a center to offer job training as well as assistance for budding technology-oriented business.

Aberdeen's role as the Army's technology center has evolved over the decades, even as Harford has grown from its rural agricultural roots into a bustling suburb, straining to accommodate its growing population.

Established during World War I to test artillery and ammunition, Aberdeen dodged a bullet in 1995, when the Pentagon targeted 33 installations for closure nationwide, including four in Maryland. Unlike many other bases that saw their work force slashed, the 72,000-acre complex on the Chesapeake Bay gained some workers that time.

Employment has remained about 15,000, though the number of civilian and military employees has slipped to 12,000 while contract employment has grown to 3,000.

In sheer numbers, the post's dominance as a job provider has declined as box-shaped distribution centers sprang up along the Interstate 95-U.S. 40 corridor, along with research-park style office complexes. Private-sector employment has grown by 30 percent over the past six years, as have nongovernmental wages, according to the county's economic development director. Still, about 48 percent of Harford's wage earners commute out of the county to work.

Aberdeen is the county's largest employer, accounting for about 13 percent of total jobs. Even before the Pentagon announced that new jobs were on the way, it was widely described as the engine of the local economy.

Harkins, employing an automobile analogy, said, "We were thrilled back in the early nineties to get warehousing and distribution jobs ... but at some point, we realized we could have a V-8, too."